

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 89 (May 2020)

Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah*

June 2020

The Middle East from a strategic US perspective - Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, writes that unlike his predecessors, Trump lacks a real foreign policy doctrine other than his “America First” slogan. Haass therefore uses the administration’s foreign policy failures to form a construct that he dubs Trump’s [“withdrawal doctrine”](#). Indeed, the administration has carried out quite a few withdrawals, only to return shortly without planning. Such is the case in the Middle East. However, unlike many in Washington who believe the US no longer needs a presence in the Middle East, Jake Sullivan and Daniel Benaim (formerly senior Obama Administration policy planners) are urging [the replacement of US military force in the region with diplomacy](#). At a May 4 briefing, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said the US has identified Russian activity in Libya and Syria, but added that NATO was prepared for every threat. The US offered Iran medical aid, but was rebuffed. The US has 5,000 troops in Iraq. In a bid to encourage the country’s prosperity, it supports and advises the government in its war against ISIS. However, Iraq bears responsibility for combatting Iranian activity in Iraqi territory, and its handling of the issue will affect the US military deployment.

The US, China and Israel - Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs David Schenker [has said](#) that Israel needs to do better vis-à-vis China and that he expects Israel to comply. The US issued a “tough-love warning” to Israel to reconsider China’s involvement in the Sorek 2 desalination project, while US Ambassador David Friedman asked Israel’s Communications Minister not to allow the introduction of Chinese 5G technology in Israel. The administration is also reportedly examining academic ties between Israel and China. Deputy Defense Secretary at the Bush Administration Doug Faith, an active member of the US Jewish community, has produced a list of strategic Chinese projects in Israel and advised that Israel [should heed](#) the warnings issued by the friendliest ever US administration. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was clear to the point of being outspoken on the issue. “We do not want the Chinese Communist Party to have access to Israeli infrastructure, Israeli communication systems, all of the things that put Israeli citizens at risk and in turn put the capacity for America to work alongside Israel on important projects at risk as well,” he said in a May 13 [interview](#) to the Israeli media. “We think these risks are very real, and we shared with them information about so that they could make their own good decisions.” Indeed, Netanyahu appears to understand the issue well. However, Israel is not alone in this situation. The US has adopted a similar approach toward its closest ally, the UK, warning, “It’s us or China”.

* Ambassador (Ret.) Barukh Binah is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute. He had served, inter alia, as the Deputy Director-General of Israel’s Foreign Ministry, in charge of North America, as Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark, Consul General in Chicago and as Deputy Head of Mission in Washington, DC.

Republican and Democratic Senators Cruz and Coons have authored a [bill](#) to fund bilateral US-Israel development of health technologies to combat Covid-19 and thus limit dependence on Chinese pharmaceuticals. At the same time, Democrat Senator Peters and Republican Senator Cotton have introduced the "[United States-Israel Military Capability Act of 2020](#)" designed to match up Israeli innovation with Pentagon funding in order to boost the innovation level of US forces, challenged by China.

The US, Israel and the Annexation issue - An annual Gallup poll published in April indicates that [US public support for Israel remains stable](#) at 60 percent (compared with 23 percent support for the Palestinians) while 70 percent support the establishment of a Palestinian state. The special relationship with Israel continues to enjoy broad consensus. However, some [question](#) its future in light of Israel's annexation intentions and shifting US interests in the region. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas declared on May 19 that agreements with Israel and the US were null and void, accusing the Trump Administration of responsibility for the crisis due to its close cooperation with the occupation. Pompeo expressed hope that Israeli-Palestinian security ties would remain intact given their benefit for both sides. Pompeo said the annexation decision was up to Israel, but ahead of his May 13 visit to Israel, sources suggested that the July 1 date was not sacrosanct. Ambassador Friedman made clear that his country was seeking a peace plan and not a recipe for annexation, [recommending](#) that Netanyahu provide the Palestinians with hope of future negotiations. At the end of his visit, members of his team [downplayed the annexation component](#) of the peace plan, saying, "We are working with the Israelis to implement the Vision for Peace. The Israelis are working through this. We're supportive of their efforts". Senior US officials claimed later that month that the US would advance the Trump plan only if Israel were committed to all its components, including negotiations on a Palestinian state. According to The New York Times, on the annexation issue, [Trump's "green light" to Israel had "turned yellow"](#). The paper's May 30 editorial went on to describe Netanyahu's intentions as "[a brazen violation of international law](#)".

Democratic presidential presumptive nominee Biden argues that unilateral annexation would bury prospects of peace and has made clear that if elected, he would resume negotiations with the Palestinians, re-open the US Consulate in East Jerusalem and seek to advance the two-state solution. His comments served as a warning to Israel against escalating the situation. Nonetheless, his senior foreign policy adviser Antony Blinken [made clear](#) that Biden would not tie military assistance to Israel to any political decisions Israel makes. "He would not tie military assistance to Israel to any political decisions that it makes. [Period. Full stop.](#)" Blinken said. In early May, [32 foreign policy Clinton Administration professionals](#) urged the Democratic Party leadership to ensure that the party platform expresses support for the two-state solution. Ambassador Friedman's [reaction was harsh](#), but [19 senators have written to Netanyahu and Gantz](#) expressing opposition to annexation. Others, among them Senator Feinstein of California and [Senator Warner](#) of Virginia expressed their opposition individually. Some, such as Sen. Ben Cardin [declined to sign](#) his colleagues' letter, saying threatening Israel with the loss of bipartisan support was counter-productive. AIPAC, too, opposes pressure on Israel. The annexation issue is also generating sharp controversy within the US Jewish community (see, for example, [Alan Solow's blog](#) in The Times of Israel, which was seemingly directed at Israelis) to such an extent that Middle East conservative scholar [Daniel Pipes wrote a New York Times column](#) explaining why Israel should avoid annexation. His article drew fire and [he responded](#) to his critics on the political right and left, seeking to dampen the outrage and "appeal for cool tempers [...] and debate calmly". Another New York Times [piece](#), describing the enlistment of Israel's defense

industries in combatting the Coronavirus, prompted furious reactions on the part of Jewish organizations, such as the ADL and Conference of Presidents, because its opening line said Israeli Defense Ministry research-and-development was “best known for pioneering cutting-edge ways to kill people and blow things up”. The activities of Prosecutor Bensouda at the International Criminal Court prompted two congressional letters urging the administration to support Israel – one signed by [69 senators](#), the other by [262 members of the House](#). The Secretary of State reiterated that he views the ICC as a political rather than a judicial institution and [warned](#), “If the ICC continues down its current course, we will exact consequences”.

The US, Jews and anti-Semitism - [Interviews with experts and activists](#) regarding the role of the Conference of Presidents in the 21st century elicited the view that support for Israel can no longer be taken for granted and is no longer a unifying force. Nonetheless, those interviewed said the Conference should strive for bipartisan support on issues related to Israel’s security, dome recommending the inclusion of J-Street in its ranks. The annual [Anti-Defamation League report](#) described the highest spike of the past four decades in anti-Semitic incidents in the US in 2019, listing [2,107 such cases](#), among them anti-Israel expressions and activities. The report listed several incidents linking Jews to the coronavirus, such as a poster at a Chicago protest against the coronavirus lockdown saying “Arbeit macht frei”. Governor Pritzker angrily tore up the sign, which he described as a hate message. [Signs bearing Nazi symbolisms](#) were spotted at a Cleveland coronavirus protest. These incidents prompted former Congress member Israel [to ask whether Jews are safe](#) in the US these days. [Some are blaming President Trump](#) for the situation, arguing that although he does not directly incite against Jews, he creates an anti-minority climate. Lawmakers have condemned anti-Semitic efforts to link the epidemic to Jews and the Senate adopted the "Never Again Education Act", allocating 10 million USD over five years for educational programs about the Holocaust.

Iran - On the second anniversary of the American pullout from the Iran nuclear deal, [the Wall Street Journal examined](#) the balance of US achievements *vis-à-vis* Iran and found a mixture of success and failure. It concluded that Trump must do more to bring Iran back to the negotiating table in order to obtain a better deal. The Carnegie Institute also believes the US has not achieved its goals and recommends that Europe, the UK included, formulate an Iranian policy of their own. A certain contradiction has emerged in US policy. On the one hand, it has downsized its military presence in Saudi Arabia in a move described as a re-assessment of the Iranian threat. On the other hand, Pompeo [declared that the US would continue to lead the international campaign against Iran](#). Congress, too, has taken a hard line: [A bipartisan letter by 387 lawmakers](#) (including Muslim lawmaker Ilhan Omar), initiated by AIPAC, urges Pompeo not to ease the weapons embargo on Iran once it expires in October. On the other hand, Congress sought to limit the President’s war powers to launch a military action against Iran (the President vetoed the bill). The US is implementing its “maximum pressure” policy on Iran almost daily with measures such as imposing sanctions on Iran’s minister of the interior because of human rights violations he has committed.

According to Brian Hook, the administration’s point person on Iran, Iran could withdraw from Syria even during the pandemic, which has taken some 7,000 Iranian lives, and despite an estimated loss of 30 billion USD on its military campaign in Syria. Nonetheless and despite certain tactical moves, Iran is still impeding Syrian national reconciliation. The US, for its part, declared that it would continue to help the people of Iraq and Lebanon resist Iranian domination. An escalating conflict is also taking place on the ground with harsh attacks by

Iranian proxies on US forces and provocation by Iranian vessels intended to generate US retaliation. Iran has warned the US against harassing its oil tankers on their way to Venezuela. On the other hand, the US is promoting measures to extend the arms embargo on Iran imposed by the UN Security Council (Resolution 2231) after the signing of the Iran nuclear deal – once it expires in October 2020. Hook wrote in The Wall Street Journal that the [US could snap back sanctions](#) if the UN failed. Biden's top foreign policy aide Blinken said that if Iran resumes its adherence to the JCPOA, the Biden Administration would follow suit. However, Biden is [unlikely to give up the US leverage](#) over Iran achieved by the Trump Administration only to revert to Obama Administration policy on Iran.

Iraq - Khadimi's appointment as Prime Minister could be good news for US-Iraq relations, and the US has indeed authorized his government to buy energy from Iran to ease Iraq's economic crisis. Iran appears to have little choice but to accept Khadimi, even if reluctantly so, pointing to its curtailed influence in the country, with the pro-Iranian Kata'ib Hezbollah also scaling back activity there. However, government circles in Iraq are concerned that the pullout of Western forces would undermine the Iraqi intelligence and operational capabilities. The parties to the US-Iraqi dialogue conducted their latest session with different interests in mind. The Americans are seeking to repel Iran but also block ISIS from now on by bolstering the Iraqi military. The Iraqis are seeking to de-escalate domestic inter-sectoral conflicts and to achieve an economic opening to the world, but also in continued ties with Iran; while the Iranians (behind the scenes) are seeking a Shiite corridor to Lebanon. At the session itself, the Americans focused on the question of security for their presence in Iraq and on reining in the pro-Iranian militias there. The Iraqis focused on continued US presence and the manner of its deployment and on the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the two sides.

Saudi Arabia and Yemen - The US defense industry is lobbying for permission to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia, which the Saudis use in Yemen. The Americans seem displeased with crown prince Mohammad Bin Salman over Saudi foot dragging in resolving the oil price war, which is harming US energy producers. The displeasure is already evident in the apparent withdrawal of some US forces from Saudi Arabia. [The FBI managed to break into the cell phone of the Saudi flight school cadet](#) who was in touch with al-Qaeda before carrying out a shooting attack in Pensacola on February 2. The cellphone download provided the US with access to al-Qaeda's training and preparation plans and those of its offshoots in Syria and Somalia. The Saudi Embassy in Washington [welcomed the completion of the investigation](#) and promised continued strategic cooperation with the US. However, given Saudi Arabia's only partial success in Yemen, it turns out that a US (and British) led international effort is required to promote peace in Yemen. According to Bruce Riedel, a former CIA official who dealt with the Gulf, the deterioration in Yemen and the occupation of Aden by the Houthis requires reconsideration of American moves and support for UN measures to help lift the Saudi siege of the Yemeni towns and lead an international assistance campaign.

Syria and Lebanon - The administration's Syria envoy James Jeffrey [said in an interview](#) that his country supports Israeli actions against Iran in Syria as a measure of self defense. He also accused the Syrian regime (and Russia, to a lesser degree) of responsibility for the coronavirus crisis in Syria by bombing hospitals. A small and efficient US presence in Syria and Iraq is important in dealing with terrorism and refugees. Like Israel, the US, too, is concerned that Syria could transfer chemical weapons to Hezbollah. It views Assad as responsible for the 2017 chemical attacks against civilians (according to the OPCW) and

continues to exert heavy economic pressure on him. The US ambassador to the UN believes Assad should stand trial for this war crime. Jeffrey thinks the Russians are seeking to maintain their military and economic presence in Syria, which they regard as a strategic success. Jeffrey thinks the US should take advantage of the situation to find a diplomatic rather than a military solution, but that it must reject Russian pressure to provide Syria with economic aid, which it views as blackmail. Regarding Lebanon, there is an ongoing conflict between the administration in Washington and Senate Republicans led by Ted Cruz who has proposed legislation to prevent taxpayer money going to countries ruled by terror organizations. Cruz argues that the Lebanese government is ruled by Hezbollah. The State Department objects to such legislation that could deprive Lebanon of some 100 million USD in annual aid.

Egypt - Defense Secretary Esper is leading a move to reduce the US presence in the multinational force in the Sinai as part of cost cutting measures. Both the State Department and Israel oppose such a move, especially in light of intensified ISIS activity in the Peninsula. On the other hand, the US intends to upgrade Egypt's helicopter fleet, replacing its Apache helicopters with Boeing attack choppers in a deal estimated at 2.3 billion USD.

Recommendations for Israel - Defense Minister Gantz and Foreign Minister Ashkenazi would do well to visit Washington as soon as possible rather than waiting for the UN General Assembly in September, since that would already coincide with the US presidential and congressional campaign. In addition to preserving and nurturing ties with the administration, they should also focus on developing ties with the Democrats and rehabilitating the hampered relations with the US Jewish community. If the Democrats win in November, a realistic option according to the latest polls, such an Israeli outreach would have significant impact. If Trump wins, his robust relationship with Netanyahu should continue in any case.